

## **NEWEST SCHEMES USE 809 AREA CODE**

Scam artists are using the 809 area code to coerce unsuspecting consumers to dial costly international pay-per-call telephone numbers. The scam has been used in classified and Internet employment advertisement, through e-mail messages, and by messages left on home phone answering machines. No matter how you get the message, if you are asked to call a number with an 809 area code that you don't recognize, don't return the call.

Although it may look like any other area code in the United States, the 809 area code covers the Caribbean. Calls there are billed at international rates, and in many cases, surcharges for proprietary services -- such as phone sex lines or astrology services -- are added.

Scam artists are using the 809 area code to get around federal regulations and 900 number blocking. Foreign carriers are not bound by U.S. 900 number regulations that require them to warn you of the charge and rate involved, and also to provide a time period during which you may terminate the call without being charged. If you make one of these calls and ring up a huge bill, there is little the U.S. government can do to help you in a dispute with a foreign carrier company.

Here's how one of the 809 scams work. You see a classified advertisement in the newspaper or on the Internet which offers full-time work for a "mystery shopper for a local store." You answer the ad by calling an 818 area code only to be instructed by a recorded voice to call another number. The second number is a transfer code that moves the service from the selected long distance caller to another more expensive long distance company. After the switch, the second call instructs the caller to call yet a third number that turns out to be in the Dominican Republic.

The scheme is simply a way to get people to make three long distance phone calls. Combined, the consumer will have to pay for the initial call, the second call to a different long distance carrier, and finally, a call to the Dominican Republic that will be billed at outrageous international rates.

The scam has also shown up in e-mail messages. A company identifying itself as "Global Communications" has been sending unsolicited and tersely worded e-mail messages threatening legal action unless the recipient pays an unspecified overdue account. The message then gives a name and a number in the 809 area code to call for further information. Callers to the number are led to believe they are talking to a live person, but, in fact, it is a clever recording that responds to the caller's voice. The recording is designed to keep callers on the line as long as possible, and is reportedly billed at \$25 per minute.

Another form of the 809 area code scam involves your answering machine at home. It works like this: You get home and notice that the message light is blinking on your answering machine. You listen to the message, and eventually, the caller asks you to call a number beginning with a long distance company's access code, followed by an 809 area code to receive information about a family member who has been ill. The message could also tell you someone has been arrested, died, or that you have won a wonderful prize. In any case, if you make the call, you may get someone who tries to keep you on the line to build up charges or you may just get a long recorded message. The bottom line is, when your phone bill comes, you see an incredible charge, oftentimes more than \$100.

The newest twist to this scam is to page people using the 809 area code. With all the new area code changes, people unknowingly are returning these calls.

Even though the 809 area code is a legitimate number on the North American calling system, unless you are planning a Caribbean vacation, have family or do business in the region, be wary of returning calls to an area code you do not recognize.